

Garronhead and Trocchi



On Boxing Day 2014 I visited Garronhead ([56.079497, -4.251837](#)) with my wife Lorna, son Alan and his 2 children Glen and Penny. It is a now ruined farm steading up behind Harviestoun that Alan had discovered a time back. It was a really wintry day, with low cloud and a biting wind, but we wanted to get out and work off some of the excesses of the previous day. The 5 of us trudged up a farm track and headed left

through water sodden rough grazing towards what is now just a pitiful pile of rubble. We found a few pieces of cast iron. I learned later that they must have been the remnants of a cast iron stove which apparently ran nearly red hot but kept the occupants warm in winter. There was little else to show that, not so terribly long ago, there were people who called it home. It felt bleak and depressing.



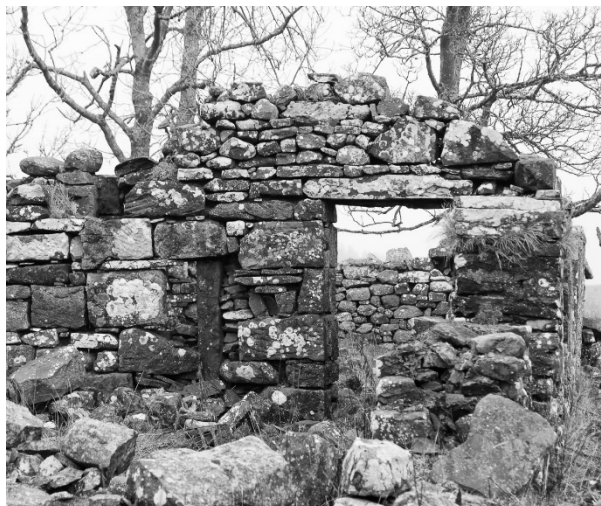
It was Alan who found the link to Alexander Trocchi in a web blog by Tom Worthington who, having been deeply impressed by Trocchi's novel *Young Adam*, wanted to find out more about this largely forgotten Scottish literary heavyweight of the 'Beat Generation'. He had set himself the task of finding Garronhead which he knew had briefly

been the home of Alexander Trocchi. I came at it from the other angle. I had never heard of Trocchi, but Tom Worthington's piece on this bleak, desolate, abandoned place intrigued me and led me on a journey to find out more about Trocchi. Few have heard of him. Some might just have spotted the name in the credits at the end of the film *'Young Adam'* starring Ewan McGregor and based on Trocchi's book originally published in 1954.



Trocchi was born in 1925 in Maryhill to a Scottish mother Annie and Alfredo, his father of Italian origin. His grandfather Ferdinand had emigrated around 1875 and become quite a celebrated chef. Alfredo was a reasonably successful bandleader.

Alexander attended Hillhead Primary, then its Secondary School and later went to Glasgow University to study English in 1942, the same year as his mother died. He was then called up



in 1943 and completed basic training with the Fleet Air Arm in 1944. He was demobbed in 1946 and returned to Glasgow University, this time to study English and Philosophy. He was a highly regarded scholar and one of his teachers, the celebrated Scottish Poet, Edwin Morgan, described him as: - *"Brilliant, wayward, charming, passing exams on Bazedrine, starting up a pig farm shortly before his finals. Everyone knew he would make his mark sometime, somehow, somewhere"*.

The pig farm was at Garronhead where he lived for a time with Betty Whyte, a 4th year Vet Student.



Trocchi with Betty (seated) and Cecil Strachan at Garronhead

They bought a horse and cart at an auction and used it to ferry bricks to make a pigsty. The local farmer George McLaren watched on bemused. Bessie McLaren described the couple as very likeable and happy – sometimes affluent and at other times hard up. They got married in January 1947 with their friend Cecil Strachan¹ but Betty soon became pregnant and had to give up her veterinary studies.

By an odd quirk of fate, round about that time, I was an infant living with my mother Jessie and my father Alex in Boquan in a house rented from the Simpson family.

Trocchi commuted from there to Glasgow University via Balfron Station which is about 8 km as the crow flies but over 10km by road. He acquired an Ariel 500c motor

bike to replace the cart and horse so perhaps used that to get to the station. He later swapped the bike for a Hillman Camper when Jacqueline Anne was born at the start of 1948.

Alex's Finals were in 1950 and he approached these with his usual aplomb, but a miscalculation of the benzedrine dose he used to help him keep awake, led to him falling asleep at his desk in Bute Hall during his final Philosophy Exam. He got a second-class M.A. rather than the expected first. He had done no studying at all. This use of drugs was soon to become a significant part of his life. Despite this relative lack of success, he was so highly regarded as a student, that he was awarded the Kemsley travelling scholarship worth £400. Thus, began his continental and literary journeys.

What follows is no more than a truncated list of 'highlights' of Trocchi's life.

After a period of European travelling with Betty and the baby, he settled in Paris where he made the acquaintance of many of the literary figures of the time such as Samuel Becket, Henry Miller, Paul Camus, Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, Brendan Behan and Jean-Paul Sartre amongst others. He teamed up with Maurice Girodias who ran the Olympia Press. He edited a magazine called Merlin together with a beautiful, well to do, American girl, Jane Lougee for whom he later left Betty. Recognising Samuel Becket's literary talent when others didn't, he published Becket's novel 'Watt' under the Merlin banner and later, 'Thief's Journal' by Jean Genet and then Beckett's 'Molloy'.

¹ Could this be the Cecil Strachan that was an English teacher and librarian in the 1960s at St Aloysius College Glasgow? In any case he apparently denied all knowledge of the £2000 worth of books Alex left him to look after.

He set off for the USA in 1956, on a visa arranged by Jane Lougee who had left him in Paris in 1954. Initially he was in New York where he spent some time as the captain of a scow – a barge like riverboat. By then he was a regular heroin user, and his novel, which he wrote largely on the scow, *'Cain's Book'*, like William Burrough's *'Naked Lunch'*, explored the world of the heroin addict. Having some time ago divorced Betty, he married Lyn Rose Hicks, described by a friend as having 'a startling beauty with one of those fragile childlike faces', in 1957 just as his drug use grew more desperate. She too – tragically became hooked on heroin. They then led a sordid existence together, chasing the next 'fix'. *Cain's Book* was published in 1960.

His American period came to an abrupt halt when he hastily left in 1961, wanted by the FBI for supplying drugs to a minor. He crossed the border into Canada, where he stayed briefly with Leonard Cohen before returning to Britain and settling in London.

In 1962, he came very much to the attention of the British and especially Scottish public after his appearance at the Edinburgh Festival. A very sizable cast of authors were brought together by the publisher John Calder and included Bertrand Russel, William Burroughs, Truman Capote, Henry Miller, Aldous Huxley, Mary McCarthy Naomi Mitchison, Hugh McDiarmid, Laurence Durrell and LP Hartley. It is likely that never before or since has such a gathering of stellar literary figures been achieved.

It was on the second day at the conference at a session of over 70 authors from 20 countries and chaired by Professor David Daiches that Trocchi criticised McDiarmid as provincial and parochial. McDiarmid, who had not read Trocchi gathered that free sexuality and drug taking were central to his work and attacked all literature that was not committed to the betterment of Mankind in political terms. It all got a bit heated but ended on a humorous and good-natured tone. Apparently, the decanter of 'water' at the top table had been filled with malt whisky which McDiarmid had been quaffing. Trocchi later denounced those who 'were intoxicated with their own drug while denouncing mine'.

There is so very much more, but I will finish now with the death of Trocchi at the relatively young age of 59 in 1984. A mere six months later, his son, Nicholas committed suicide.

Jon Calder wrote a year later in the *Edinburgh Review*. "He might have become the outstanding writer of his generation but was destroyed by his addiction. He proves, to my satisfaction at least, that there is no greater danger to real creativity than drug dependency which excites the mind but removes the will and ability to work".



180-degree panorama from Garronhead front doorway looking SE. You can see the same wall on the left and right

Afterword

In May this year (2020), I revisited Garronhead. We had been in Covid-19 lockdown for 4 weeks and I took advantage of the glorious weather to cycle up the track. Largely sheltered from the north wind, this is a different place. The view



5. Alex and Betty (seated) with Cecil Strachan at Garronhead, c.1948.

across the valley is stunning and I can just make out my own house. It feels warm against the SE facing wall and I can see how pretty this must have looked at the time. I look around to see if I can work out exactly where the photo was taken in 1948.



Looking across to Stronend in 2020

It's not too hard to realise that the hill in the background of the photo is Stronend. The tree behind them is no longer standing, but behind the ruined wall, I spot the decaying remains of a tree.

I believe it must be the tree that stood erect 72 years ago. Like Garronhead itself, the years have taken a heavy toll.



The house and outbuildings are much as I remember, but bright and warm in the sunshine, the mood is quite different. I imagine it would be a happy place.



On my way back down the hill, I meet up with Brenda and Dougie Ross who now farm the area. It seems I was quizzing the wrong McLarens. Rosie Walters later filled in some blanks. The farmer George McLaren (Geordie) and his daughters Bessie and Nan, had lived at Harviestoun a few hundred yards from Garronhead. Had I but known at the time of my first visit, I could have talked to

Bessie and found out a bit more about the pig farming students at Garronhead as she and her sister were living in Kippen. Bessie died in 2012 and her sister, Nan McKillop died in 2019.

Now, much later, Lorna found a reference to Garronhead in an old article featuring the late Jim McEwan, of Woodfoot, (now known as Camalt). He was interviewed by John Duckworth for the winter 1995/6 edition of "The Fintry Focus".

Apparently, Jim's father was born at Garronhead. Much later, in 1946, a mere year before Alex Trocchi rented the place, he was in a position to give serious consideration to an offer to buy Garronhead. He discussed this with his uncle Andrew Cowan of the Lurg farm. His uncle suggested he would be better off buying the Lurg which he then did after persuading the bank in Balfron to support him.

Tony Flisch July 2020.